

# SOUL BEACH

Kate Harrison



For Mum, Dad and especially Toni –  
because sisters are forever . . .



***The girl is dead, no doubt about it.***

*That face, the one that launched a billion internet clicks, is flushed, as though she's spent too long in the sun. Somehow, her skin still glows – one of the TV critics called her dewy – but that won't last, of course. After the struggle, her hair was tangled, but now it's combed straight and fanned out against her pillow. Like Sleeping Beauty.*

*Is she truly beautiful, or just pretty? When she was alive, there was no doubt, because the whole package – the face, the confidence, the walk, and that voice – was irresistible. Now she's still, it's easier to be objective.*

*Ah, let's be charitable. Let's call her beautiful. The creamy white dress is draped oddly and it looks a little slutty, but it's too much work to change it now. Dead weight is hard to shift.*

*Her eyes are closed. A few seconds ago, at least ten minutes after she stopped struggling, the lids fluttered several times, as though she were dreaming. Of an eternal spotlight, maybe? Then, when it seemed that she might need to be smothered again, she stopped moving. It must have been a last reflex.*

*Or maybe that was the exact moment that she went. Where is she now? Lying in a soft meadow, with butterflies and bees dancing around her? Or on a tropical beach, where the sea laps against her body?*

*It is time to go. But at least whoever finds her won't be haunted by her appearance. For a corpse, she is anything but lifeless.*



# 1

The first email from my sister arrives on the morning of her funeral.

I know. What kind of sick freak checks her email before she goes to see her sister being buried? But sometimes it hurts so much I feel like I've got acid in my veins instead of blood, and that's when I go online.

Online, everything's *normal*. No inquests, no detectives, no TV cameras. Just Facebook updates about who's dating who. And junk emails from African princes offering me a share of their fortunes. Oh, yeah, and emails from dead people. Not *quite* so normal.

I almost miss the message, and as soon as I do see it, I know it can't be real. It's a sick coincidence or someone's hacked her account, the one she used to send me college gossip and drunken photos.

But even though I know it's a hoax, my finger locks onto the mouse and I can't breathe as I wait for the message to load ...

**To:** AliceinWonderland@forsterfamily.co.uk

**From:** Meggie@MeggieForster.net

**Date:** September 15 2009

**Time:** 10:05:09

**Subject:**

[THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN LEFT BLANK]

**To report this message as a phishing attempt, click [here](#).**

The white screen makes my eyes hurt, but I don't dare to blink in case the message disappears.

'Alice. What are you doing up there, sweetheart? The car's here.'

I can't speak.

It's got to be a glitch. A ghost in the machine. The email version of those newspaper stories about someone suddenly getting a Christmas card that was posted in 1952 by a long-dead granny.

And surely it's nothing but a fluke that my sister's long lost email appears one hour before her final . . . *performance*.

'Alice?'

I jump, even though Mum is still outside my door. 'Nearly ready,' I shout.

But I don't move. I can't. I feel like there's something there. Something I'm not seeing.

Maybe I really have lost it now. 'You're not real,' I hiss at the screen. 'You're not.'

The longer I stare, the more I know I'm missing something.

I stand up. My legs are like lead, and I can't look away from the screen. What is it I'm not seeing?

'Alice? Come on, now.' Mum sounds ratty. I guess today isn't going to go down as the best day of her life, either. I should try harder. *Be a better daughter*, now I'm an only child.

Up. Towards the door. One foot in front of the other. Keep going.

And then I turn back to the screen and I see it. The time.

10:05:09

Either just past ten o'clock on the morning of Meggie's funeral.

Or 10/05/09.

The date of my sixteenth birthday. And the date Meggie was murdered.

## 2

We're supposed to be yesterday's news. Or, more accurately, four months ago's news. The tragic Forster family.

There've been hundreds more murders since Meggie's. Stabbings, shootings, crashes. But then my sister's death would have been headline-grabbing even if she hadn't been a reality TV star. According to my media studies teacher, Mr Bryant, newspapers prefer their murder victims female, pretty and white, even though most kids who die are male, spotty and black.

Though he hasn't given that particular lesson since Meggie died.

As the car pulls away I recognise two of the local TV journos standing outside our house. I used to watch them on the portable telly in my bedroom, as they reported live underneath my window. If I muted the sound, I could hear their voices through the glass.

I close my eyes, to shut everything out. Except it doesn't work, because now I can see *that* screen, and *that* date. It can't be chance, can it?

'I hope no one spots your cufflinks, Glen.'

My father sighs. 'Why?'

'They're too shiny. Too cheerful. Appearances matter today.'

Mum's appearance is spot on, in her brand new grey silk dress. Before Meggie died, she'd have been gutted to be a size fourteen. *Old* Mum did yoga and Pilates and Body Combat. New Mum does Grief Counselling instead. Her body is



flabbier but her spirit is honed. Monday night is Group, Wednesday afternoon is One-to-One with her therapist, Olav, Thursday is social, and then at the weekends she's online the whole time, *sharing*. She's a big celebrity on the grief forums.

Dad's gone the other way. He won't join the Group, even though it'd shut Mum up, and he looks like a tramp in his funeral suit, it's so loose. His diet now is peanuts and whisky. He's the strong, silent type, like a cowboy in an ancient Western. Well, a cowboy who moonlights as a solicitor.

I am piggy in the middle. And don't I feel like a piggy today, in shiny tights that are too hot for the Indian summer, a granny-ish black skirt and a puffy-sleeved cream blouse that my mother chose. I sweat between my parents, dressed like a five-year-old on her way to a birthday party, and I have to jam my hands under my legs to stop myself reaching for the door and making a run for it.

As the car pulls up at the church, the size of the crowd is shocking.

Could Meggie's murderer be here?

The first person I recognise is Sahara, because she's so tall. She raises her muscular arm in a half-wave. Sahara lived in the room next to Meggie in halls, and I recognise some of the other girls from my trips to uni alongside her. I scan the faces, looking for guilt. Or evil.

*Did one of you kill my sister?*

I want to scream the question at them, to see if anyone reacts. But would knowing the truth make any of this any easier for me to stand?

A couple of the girls have been crying already. Sahara's boyfriend is the only guy with them. What's his name? Andrew? Aidan? He's *that* memorable.

There's no Tim, of course. Mum was going to ban him, but Dad pointed out that he wouldn't have come anyway. He's the kind of guy who'd understand that it'd be the wrong thing.

Mum tutted and muttered something like, '*And the kind of guy that murders his girlfriend and gets away with it*'.

But I don't believe for one second that he killed her. And I know that today he'll be thinking of us. Thinking of Meggie.

To the left of Sahara there are more people who could be students, but I don't recognise any of them. So what the hell are they doing here? I clock the glazed eyes and the slack jaws and the way they're staring at me, and then I know. They're the same people who hang out on the net, posting comments after the clips of Meggie on YouTube or on the *Sing for your Supper* fan forums, saying how they miss her and how they loved her and how she was their best friend.

All it took was one series of that crappy reality show for them to believe she was part of their lives, and that they owned a little part of her.

*But does that mean one of them killed her?*

Dad says they're just harmless nutters, but how did they know to come to this church today? Maybe there's a website for people who get off on death.

*Or a website for people who want to impersonate their dead heroes?*

I might be looking into the eyes of the person who hacked her account and sent me that email. I feel *sick*.

We get out of the car, and Mum is swallowed up by a huddle of people. Her grief buddies. Five women, and a tall, sandy-haired man with swollen lips, like a supermodel's, and an airbrushed face. I know straight away this must be Olav, the Expert in Loss.

Robbie and Cara are standing by the church entrance. They're always here for me. In a parallel universe, where the only reason to remember 10/05/09 is for my sixteenth birthday, Robbie would still feel like my boyfriend and Cara would feel like my best friend and all three of us would be planning which uni to apply for, and wondering whether our

folks will let us go on holiday together. Instead . . .

They hug me, Cara first, then Robbie. Cara looks the same as ever – she’s going through a phase of always wearing black, even on the beach – but Robbie, who lives in jeans, looks so much older and more serious in his suit and, well, kind of sexier, I guess. Except I don’t know if I feel that way about him any more.

Dad looks lost. There’s no one here for him.

It’s hot outside after the air conditioned car, and then cold again as we step into the dark church porch. I feel feverish.

Oh, God.

That can’t be her, in that coffin ahead of me. We file into the front pew, and I stare at my hands. Anything but look at it. She’s with us, but not. And she’s certainly, definitely, one hundred per cent not able to send me blank emails at mystically significant times.

The vicar has a booming voice that fills the church space with words about my sister, a girl he never knew, and never will.

‘Today is a day for grief, but also for gratitude, for the life of Megan Sophie London Forster. The long wait to put Megan to rest has been taxing for those who loved her, and most of all for her mother, Beatrice, her father, Glen, and her sister, Alice . . .’

Around me, people are singing. Sahara is belting it out, and so are most of the stalkers. But hymns meant nothing to Meggie: even *Amazing Grace*, the song that launched her reality TV career, wasn’t *her* choice. She only liked girl solo artistes with voices as powerful as her own. She would have *hated* this.

I think of her under the lid of her coffin. I know she’s wearing stilettos and her second favourite dress, the one with big red hand-painted poppies. She couldn’t wear her true favourite, the silky white wrap dress that flowed like

spring water, because she had it on when she was found. It's *evidence*.

I thought coffins were as sturdy as a Landrover Discovery, to see the passenger safely into the afterlife. But hers is slim and sleek, with chrome handles as flimsy as the straps on her stilettos.

That's when I stop acting brave. And that's when I start crying.

I can't do it. I can't see her buried.

It is the worst thing that could happen to her. She hated the dark, hated cramped spaces, and as for dirt . . . my sister never even made sandcastles because she didn't want filthy nails.

Instead, I run home – two miles through the back streets, so I don't bump into anyone I know. All the way, I try to block out images of her under the ground, hands grasping at the heavy earth, lungs gasping for oxygen but filling up with soil with every breath.

Is that how she felt when the killer held a pillow over her face?

My hand is shaking so much that I can hardly get the key in our front door, and my own breath is loud and painful. When I'm back in my room, I peel off my sweaty clothes, but my skin still smells of church, of incense. Of death.

My computer suddenly seems menacing. I power up, half expecting to find that I imagined that email. And half hoping there will be another one.

But when I log on, nothing's changed. The email's still there but nothing more.

I stare at it, in case there's a picture there somewhere, hidden in the pixels, but nothing changes. Not even the time:  
10.05.09

Four months and five days since she left us.  
I open up my email and begin to write.

**From:** AliceinWonderland@forsterfamily.co.uk  
**To:** Meggie@MeggieForster.net

**My dearest sister,**

No. Totally the wrong way to start. I never used to call her soppy names, and even though she's never going to see this, she'd laugh, or think I'd gone properly crazy if I started now.

I delete the first line, and start again.

**Megster!**

Better. It's one of the thousand or so nicknames I had for her.

**Where were you, big sis? You missed it. Your own funeral. And they played the worst ever music, you'll be turning in your grave, eh?**

I've never used that phrase before.

**I hope you're OK. In your grave. Though that sounds too weird. I'm really sorry I didn't stay to throw in the earth or whatever it is you're supposed to do. I couldn't face it.**

Earth. The word makes my breathing go shallow again.

**I guess if you're . . . here, somehow, still, then you might have seen me in church. I'm sorry for that too. I know you hate cry-babies.**

**I tried to tell them not to bury you. I said we should scatter your ashes somewhere you loved, like on the beach in Corfu, but then the police said you had to be buried, in case . . .**

I stop. Would a dead person even care about the fate of their body, or would they have abandoned it like last season's Primark specials?

Well, let's not go into that. But you had a hell of a turnout, Meggie. So many people loved you, although even all their love added together isn't as much as I loved you. You knew that, didn't you? Even though we didn't say it often enough . . .

**I'm saying it now. I love you lots,**

**Your baby sister** xx

I re-read the email. Maybe I should be telling her everything that's happened since she went: the silences at home, the tribute single, my 'better than expected, given the circumstances' GCSE results, my relapse as a nail-biter.

But if she's watching from heaven, then she knows all that already. What she needs to know instead is the stuff that *really* matters, and I feel lighter now that I've told her. OK, so if that blank email *was* sent by a stupid, sicko fan who hacked her account, then I've given him more than enough drama to make his day. But who cares? If there's a tiny chance she'll hear me – even if it's tinier than me discovering men on Mars or a cure for cancer – then it's worth the risk of some sad loner with a fetish for dead girls knowing how I feel.

I press *send*.